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## So What Do You Do James Bennet, Editor of *The Atlantic*?

### An editor defends putting Britney on the cover of his famous mag and explains turning longform articles into blog posts

By David S. Hirschman - March 19, 2008



When longtime *New York Times* reporter James Bennet became editor of the venerable *Atlantic* just over two years ago, *Slate's* media critic Jack Shafer [wrote](#) that, because of the magazine's stable of great writers, "even a dunce" could pilot it to journalistic greatness. But at a time when the magazine industry is rapidly adapting to the Web, there is more to an editor's job than simply creating solid longform features. In fact, Bennet says that he has been surprised to find that more than half of his time is spent on *The Atlantic's* [Web site](#) -- keeping on top of online content, navigating the "relationship between a very turbulent Web site of ideas and a monthly magazine of ideas," and planning for the site's future incarnations.

mediabistro.com caught up with Bennet recently to discuss how *The Atlantic's* signature long features are produced, this month's Britney Spears cover story, with which writer David Samuels [takes](#) joking credit for "destroying *The Atlantic*"), and what is shaping up to be the "most amazing campaign that a lot of us have ever experienced."

**Name:** James Bennet

**Position:** Editor, *The Atlantic*
**Resume:** Started as an intern for the *News & Observer* in Raleigh, N.C.; interned at *The New Republic*; editor at *Washington Monthly*; reporter for *The New York Times* for 15 years, covering metro news, business, politics, and media -- was also the White House correspondent, Jerusalem correspondent, and a writer for the *Times* magazine; joined *The Atlantic* in 2006.

**Birthday:** March 28, 1966

**Hometown:** Born in Boston, raised in D.C.

**Education:** B.A. from Yale

**Marital status:** Married

**First section of Sunday Times:** "Depends which one my wife gets to first, but ... I usually start with *The Week in Review*, back to front."

**Favorite TV show:** *South Park*
**Last books read:** *The World Without Us* by Alan Weisman, and *The Dain Curse* by Dashiell Hammett

**Guilty pleasure:** Going to the gym. "It's time stolen from the magazine and from my family."

**Politics is obviously a main component of *The Atlantic's* content, and this is shaping up as the mother of all election seasons. Is it hard to produce large monthly features about stuff that's changing so rapidly?**

In the primary season, it's obviously difficult in the magazine to look three months ahead and say exactly where we'll be. So it's tricky. But we have a pretty great group of writers now, and we've been lucky, I think, in this campaign season. I think our coverage holds up pretty well.

**On the whole, *The Atlantic* tends not to show its hand politically. How difficult is it to remain balanced?**

*The Atlantic* has always been a platform for strong-minded writers who disagree with each other -- and sometimes disagree with themselves, if you watch their work over a number of years. This is a great strength and also a weakness for the magazine. I can understand the appeal of a magazine that takes a very consistent and predictable editorial line. Readers return to it to have their own views confirmed, or because they're comfortable with that view of the world. *The Atlantic* in that sense is a much more unpredictable and surprising magazine. We're not contrarian for the sake of being contrarian, but we go where the reporting takes us, and where the argumentation takes the writer.

**Is the immediacy of the campaign coverage why you're putting more of an emphasis online, with the**

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campaign a lot of us have ever experienced. But you'll see us shift our focus back after the campaign. Our main areas of interest are things thinking people care about -- it's politics, it's business, it's culture, and it's science.

**In Current, the pieces are pretty short. How do you translate the voice and the longer, deeper features of the magazine into such an abbreviated format?**

You don't. The magazine and the Web site do different things. I think there's a very nice relationship between a very turbulent Web site of ideas and a monthly magazine of ideas. We're mixing provocative arguments in both mediums, but we're doing it in different ways.

The wonderful thing about the Web, for us, is that for our writers and editors, it can be a long time between "drinks" in the magazine. They'll work on stories for a month, and people can disappear from our pages for a month or two. So the Web just gives our guys another outlet to show what they can do, but they're not doing the same kind of thing on the Web as they are for the magazine. All of a sudden we have a highly active and interesting Web site that is growing really fast. In the last year, we've gone from just over 500,000 unique visitors to almost 2.3 million monthly, and a lot of that has been the addition of the bloggers, and taking our pay wall down.

**With so much time between the release of magazine issues, do you see the Web site as a place where you would break news now, as well?**

We wrestle with that question: when you have negative news or a big news story and the magazine's not coming out for a month, whether you try to rush it up onto the Web instead. We've had a couple of experiences where news has broken related to a big story that we're about to bring out, where we have rushed it up on the Web for that reason. One example of this was when Zarqawi was killed last year, we happened to have a huge [profile](#) of him coming up in the magazine, so we put it up on the Web. And we've had frustrations the other way where we've had a big piece coming, and some item in it that was highly newsworthy got broken somewhere else between the time we closed the issue and the time it appeared.

**Are you planning on doing more video on the Web?**

Yes. We've already started, and we've had a great group internally that have shown a lot of initiative in starting the first *Atlantic* experiments in video. We've been doing this roundtable with our bloggers called "[The Table](#)" that is attracting a fair amount of traffic and attention, and we've also been doing some video alongside our big magazine pieces and some of our columnists. You're going to be seeing a lot more of that. We'll also be launching more blogs, and more non-blog content and online dispatches soon. I'm eager to add more and more dimensions to the Web site.

**I certainly don't think anybody who would be apt to pick up *Us Weekly* or *People* will pick up the issue of *The Atlantic* with Britney on the cover.**

**In the past two issues, you've had a couple of stories that attracted major attention: Lori Gottlieb's [piece](#) about women settling, and this month's [cover story](#) about the paparazzi and Britney Spears. Do these pieces represent a change at all in where you're taking the magazine?**

I think it's totally in keeping with the history of the magazine, and I think our readers expect from us to be provoked on all sorts of subjects. We're getting a lot of mail in the "settling" piece, and it's really kind of amazing how much pickup it's gotten in the media world -- everyone from Dr. Phil and NPR to the *Nightly News* and Colbert. The expression "putting Britney on the cover" is kind of shorthand in the industry for trying to become *People* or *Us Weekly*, which, of course, would never make sense for *The Atlantic*. That's not what we're doing. There are other elements of this story than just the latest glimpse of the starlet in distress ... that make this a kind of classic *Atlantic* piece. It's a cultural story, it's a business story, it's a media story, and it's a funny, rollicking yarn. I would want to turn the question around, though, and say "Why wouldn't we put Britney on the cover?"

**It'll be interesting to see whether you get a spike at the newsstand because of it.**

I don't know. I certainly don't think anybody who would be apt to pick up *Us Weekly* or *People* will pick up this issue of *The Atlantic*. That's not what we're aiming for or anticipate.

**You're in the process of redesigning the magazine. How is that going, and what sorts of elements are you planning on changing?**

We're in the very early stages of it. We've contracted with Michael Beirut from Pentagram to do it. We're redesigning the magazine and the Web site at the same time. Certain design elements will carry over, but the goal is to take better advantage of what each of the separate mediums is capable of -- which means essentially enhancing the magazininess of the magazine and enhancing the user experience on the Web.

**What have been some of the more challenging aspects of the job over the past two years? Has it been hard to switch over from the pace of a daily paper.**

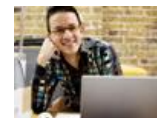
Well, going from being the interviewer to being the interview subject is one. Another is simply management, which is an experience a lot of people have in going from being a writer to being an editor. And, sure, there are aspects of the daily newspaper life that I miss, but we have a lot of activity now at *The Atlantic* too. And the core mission of *The Atlantic* -- the creation of the well pieces we do -- is a deeply satisfying enterprise to be part of. I feel incredibly lucky to be involved in that.

**What is the genesis of one of these long pieces, and how do you decide how long is too long?**

We have the freedom here to go up to [10,000 words] or beyond that, but we set a really high standard that every incremental word has to be earned.

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never worked with before. And then we place a handful of very big bets.

**David S. Hirschman** is a freelance writer and editor of *mediabistro.com's Daily Newsfeed*.

[This interview has been edited for length and clarity.]

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